



independence for statistics

TUC submission

Introduction

This document presents the TUC's submission to the Treasury consultation on plans to legislate for independent governance arrangements for National Statistics. In it we welcome this objective, but emphasise that recent experience has indicated how important it is that this service should be adequately funded.

The TUC

The TUC is the voice of Britain at work. Representing nearly 6.5 million workers in 66 unions, the TUC seeks to raise the quality of working life and promote equality for all. Our members work in every town, city and region of the country, in manufacturing and services, and in the public and private sectors; all the industries in which they work rely to some extent on an independent and reliable statistical service.

The problem

Leading statisticians have been worried for some time about declining public trust in official statistics. In 2004 the Statistics Commission began a programme of research into the issue, and published *Omnibus Survey: Initial findings on public confidence in official statistics* (available at www.statistics.gov.uk/about/data/public_confidence.asp). The findings included:

- 68% of the public believed official figures “were changed to support a particular argument;”
- 58% believed “there was political interference in their production”;
- 69% believed that “mistakes were suppressed” and
- 59% “did not agree that the Government uses official figures honestly when talking about its policies”.

Last year the Statistics Commission followed this up with *Official Statistics: Perceptions and Trust* (available at http://www.statscom.org.uk/media_pdfs/reports/024%20-%20Perceptions%20Trust.pdf), researched for the Commission by MORI, who interviewed 36 leading academics and figures from media, government, business and the voluntary sector. From these interviews the Commission discovered that these opinion-formers believed that, although there was room for improvement, British statistics were world class. They did not think, however, that this was reflected in popular perceptions, and there emerged “a widely-held view that there needed to be greater distance between the producers of statistics and government, possibly with an independent regulatory body which would monitor the use of official statistics.”

General comments

It is against this background that the proposals in the consultation document have emerged; the Government envisages that ONS should be established as a non-Ministerial Department, though its employees would still have civil service status. The Department would answer to a Board, with a majority of Non-Executive Directors and a

non-executive Chair, and a chief executive, to be known as the Chief Statistician, who would also be the chief statistical adviser to the Government.

The TUC welcomes this decision in principle. The lack of trust in official statistics that has developed in some quarters is not, for the most part, the result of mistakes made by ONS itself, and independence should help to restore trust.

As Lord Moser has written, “there are now genuine problems with public trust in government figures. In my view, this has less to do with their real quality than with the way they are used. Indeed, the Office for National Statistics, which is at the centre of the system, has very high standards and a fine international reputation.” (“Dangers in reforming government statistics”, Klaus Moser, *Financial Times*, 8 – 6 –06.)

The importance of adequate investment

The TUC’s greatest concern about independence is whether the newly independent statistical service would be adequately funded. The Office for National Statistics was hit hard by the Gershon and Lyons reviews, which were interpreted as requiring savings of £25 million a year and the re-location of 850 jobs out London and the South East by 2010. (*Annual Report and Accounts 2004-5*, ONS, p 34.) The job losses and re-locations have disrupted work and had inevitable consequences for morale and the quality of work.

The TUC is therefore very concerned about the statement in para 4.4 of the consultation document that the reforms being considered here “should, as far possible, reinforce the significant beneficial organisational and modernisation work already underway in the ONS, and across government more generally, in the light of the Lyons Review of public sector relocation and the Gershon Review of public sector efficiency.”

The recognition, in para 4.42, of the importance that “the funding of the new arrangements be consistent with statutory independence” is very welcome. The ONS is a good example of a service whose quality depends on the quality of its staff. It is important that the independent statistical service should be able to recruit and retain high quality personnel, and this depends upon competitive pay rates, good industrial relations, equal opportunities and continuing training. The new service must be resourced at a level that will enable it to guarantee all this.

One decision that will provide a good deal of reassurance to staff, who have been disturbed by recent upheavals, is the promise that civil service status will be retained. It is important to “facilitate the continued movement of professional staff within and across the statistical system,” but the reassurance this decision gives about the maintenance of employees’ terms and conditions is not negligible either.

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